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A COMPULSORY COURSE IN COMMON-SENSE

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It happened at the christening of a modern prince. They had followed the time-honored custom of inviting the most influential of the fairies to the christening, hoping that these magnates, under the mollifying influence of stalled ox and other dainties, might be moved to bestow rare treasures upon the young prince. Everything went well, and at the end of the christening feast the fairies with an enthusiastic abandon began wishing gifts on the defenseless prince.

Said the first, "He shall be mighty of intellect." Said the second, "He shall have a magnetic personality." Said the third, "He shall have the gift of prophetic insight."

At this point in rushed a malevolent old fairy with a cast in one eye, a prominent suffragette and a member of the aerial I.W.W. She had not been bidden to the christening. In her rage she had decided to join the wishing fest uninvited. "He shan't have a grain of common-sense," she cried.

Well, that settled it. As far as real success in life was concerned, the prince might just as well have got off the world the night of the christening. Despite the gifts of the other fairies, he never was healthy, he never was wealthy, he never was wise. Why not? *He didn't have a grain of common-sense.* And you can't beat success out of the batter of life when the salt of common-sense is missing.

How much of the salt of common-sense are we dropping into the mixture known as secondary education? The fundamental object of secondary education, as of all other education, is to fit the individual for success in life. Grant that *success* connotes one thing to you, and another to me, and still another to our neighbor. We won't take up that phase of the problem. There isn't a brand of success on the market that is made without the salt of common-sense.

Why shouldn't every high school in the country have at least one course devoted exclusively to the development of common-sense in everyday matters? Call it what you like. The Highland Park High School of Highland Park, Michigan, has such a course; they call it commercial correspondence. No student is allowed to graduate from this high school who has not devoted several hours a week throughout his Senior year to the development of common-sense. This course is, in the nature of things, still in the making. Let us hope it always will be. If it ever reaches the stage where it is considered a finished product, the time to discard it and start a new one will assuredly be long past. A course in common-sense must be a living, pulsating, throbbing thing, vitalized by a guide who is a student of the psychology of men and affairs and who is thoroughly alive to times and conditions.

Though, as has been said, the course in common-sense in the Highland Park High School is subject to frequent change, the basic subject-matter of the course remains practically the same, the changes occurring in the methods of attacking the problems involved and in the amount of stress laid upon different phases of the work. There is no textbook on the market at present that would be of much value in such a course; each instructor must work out his own salvation. A brief outline of the basic subject-matter of the Highland Park course, together with a few equally brief suggestions as to possible ways of handling it, will probably interest those who, like the writer, believe that common-sense is more to be desired than great erudition. For the most part these suggestions represent successful experiment and practice in the classroom; the few which do not have occurred to the writer during a temporary return to the practical business world and seem to her decidedly helpful and practical.

Roughly outlined, the following subjects are the most important ones dealt with in this course in common-sense: the mechanical details of a good letter; the handling of the subject-matter in various types of letters; filing; everyday information concerning the postal service; elementary banking knowledge; the use and abuse of the telephone; the value and development of personality.

The mechanical details of a good letter can be divided into two general classes: details of composition and details of form.

Under mechanical details of composition must be considered spelling, grammar, punctuation, sentence construction, and diction. The price of good spelling, like that of liberty, is eternal vigilance. Use what method you will—or ten different methods if you will—but keep everlastingly at it. As a matter of fact, ten different methods are probably better than one; if you can keep the poor speller in an agony of suspense because he doesn't know how, when, or where the next attack will come, the chances are that he will mend his spelling in sheer self-defense. A brief but thorough review of the fundamental terms of grammar is necessary as a basis for the work in punctuation and sentence structure. In punctuation give as few rules as possible (those found in Woolley's *Handbook of Composition* are excellent), but see that they are thoroughly mastered. Drill upon their application until it becomes instinct. Such drill is absolutely necessary with most students. There may be a few heaven-born punctuators, but the great majority of the untrained are of the earth, earthy. Teach punctuation as a means of clarifying expression, and students will rejoice in the added power it gives them. Give systematic drill in the correction of errors in sentence structure made by groups in the class. Devote little or no class time to the correction of an error in sentence structure made by one individual; such an error should be taken up in private conference with that individual. Take a class-period occasionally to study comparative values in different types of sentence structure. In the study of diction discrimination should be the keynote. Cultivate a desire for the right word. Raise that desire to the *nth* degree, if possible. Teach the avoidance of the stereotyped and bromidic in words and phrases. To the initiate the study of diction is a fascinating, all-absorbing task. Sometimes the contagion of it sweeps a class, and it is a subject for boundless thanksgiving that only in rare cases do its victims fully recover. These mechanical features should be woven into the work of the entire year, of course, but a certain amount of time should be definitely devoted to them.

Let us consider next the mechanical details of form. These include the proper placing of the letter on the page, various styles of arrangement of the parts of a letter, and a study of the correct paper to use, its quality, the different sizes and different styles in letterheads. The proper placing of a letter on the page is easily taught; it is merely a matter of the cultivation of the eye; and a desire for wide margins, pleasing spacing, and effective balancing may be speedily aroused. The instructor cannot afford to be dictatorial when it comes to the question of variety of arrangement of the parts of a letter; attention should be called to as many forms as possible and to their advantages and disadvantages. But no one style is the only correct or desirable style. Don't attempt the study of paper without bringing an infinite variety of samples into class. The students will gladly bring them in themselves. It is too large a field for exhaustive study, of course, but the leading principles of good taste and common-sense can be taught. The budding pedagogue may learn not to apply for her first position in violet ink on cheap notepaper; the prospective butcher may decide against a life-sized reproduction of the packing-shed and a left-side trail of little porkers as his letterhead. Any instructor who succeeds in inculcating a few ideals that will result in the abolishment of some of the existing atrocities in stationery is doing a noble work.

From the mechanical side of a letter we pass to its content. Let us consider first that of the business letter. It goes without saying that the business letter should be clear, concise, coherent, comprehensive—carry it as far as the alliteration pleases your fancy. The development of these qualities constitutes no small part of the instructor's task. But he is a poor instructor who in his efforts to inspire a clear, concise, coherent letter neglects to emphasize from the very beginning the importance of the mental attitude of the writer as reflected in his letters. The student should encounter a constant flow of analytical questions: What idea of you, personally, will your correspondent get from this letter? Is the tone of this letter of apology too subservient? Is this letter of complaint dignified and courteous, or have you been whining in it,

or possibly bullying? Does your letter of application sound over-confident? Does your note congratulating that important business acquaintance on some success of his ring true, or does it sound like politic flattery? What have you gained in self-respect and in business by answering that discourteous, unjust letter with dignified or even friendly courtesy? Much of the friction of the business world of the future would be avoided could we teach our secondary-school graduate to criticize, intelligently and constructively, his own mental attitude.

Upon what phases and fields in the business world shall the letters of this course in common-sense touch? The following are some of the most important: letters ordering goods, letters requesting information, letters answering requests for information, letters of complaint, answers to letters of complaint, simple advertising letters, letters of recommendation, letters of application.

It may be well to emphasize again at this point the fact that the aim of this course is the development of common-sense. Some of the present-day writers of texts in commercial correspondence are strongly advocating that the class, or sections of the class, pay visits to manufacturing or business concerns, study their workings, and base a series of business letters of different types on the information thus gained. They speak in glowing terms of the practical nature of such work and of the enthusiasm aroused in the students. If you belong to the try-anything-once club, go ahead; your defenseless students must submit to being the dogs. But does it stand to reason that the average high-school boy or girl of seventeen or eighteen, whose time and opportunities for observation of such concerns are necessarily decidedly limited, is going to be able to get a grasp on business situations that will enable him to write intelligent, effective, business letters concerning them? No manufacturing or business concern would think of engaging a well-educated man of thirty who knows nothing of their particular line of work, allowing him to wander around the plant or establishment a few hours, possibly under expert guidance, and then turning over their correspondence to him. If, then, our immature secondary-school students are capable of following the plans of these textbook writers, they are infant commercial prod-

gies, whose time and talents are being lamentably wasted in the classroom. The vast majority of them cannot be so classified, however, and for that vast majority the writer would recommend that their business letters deal, as far as possible, with situations likely to arise in their own lives.

For example, let these students write letters ordering athletic goods, class pins, magazines; letters asking for college catalogues, for information for use in debates, for plans for conducting a boys' military camp; letters complaining that a certain magazine does not come regularly, that the goods sent were not as represented in the catalogue; that several items on the last grocery bill were never ordered nor received; a follow-up series of advertising letters calling the attention of desirable patrons to the high-school fair; letters applying for positions for which the student is actually eligible.

Teach the student to apply the principles of good letter-writing to letters dealing with situations with which he is thoroughly familiar. Don't train him in the technical details of some business; develop his common-sense. What employers are demanding is intelligent, wide-awake, raw material, capable of rapid assimilation. The course in common-sense should develop the right attitude of mind rather than offer a smattering of surface knowledge.

We have devoted a great deal of time to the consideration of the content of the business letter. Just a word concerning that of the friendly letter. Can't we teach our students the you-attitude instead of the I-attitude in their friendly letters? Can't we teach them that a weather report followed by a list of events arranged in chronological order by no means constitutes a friendly letter? Can't we teach them that the only friendly letter worth writing is the one in which they give freely and generously of their best selves? We are all niggards with our friends these days when it comes to writing letters. Why not reform the coming generation? The average class responds enthusiastically to suggestions of the kind indicated. The instructor will often find letters of actual literary merit among those written in this part of the course. Read them to the class; they are inspirational. Let the letters of some of our well-known writers—Lafcadio Hearn, Thomas

Bailey Aldrich, O. Henry, and Robert Louis Stevenson—serve as inspiration also. And don't forget some of our modern fiction that takes the form of letters—*The Lady of the Decoration* and *Molly Make-Believe*, for instance. There is far more material available than an instructor can use.

Formal or third-person notes should be taught, although, owing to the press of more important things in the course, comparatively little time can be spent on them. But do teach bread-and-butter notes, not mere dutiful acknowledgments of your hostess' courtesy, but warm, whimsical, appreciative, thank-you notes that insure the writer another invitation. That is common-sense, isn't it? And, by all means, plant and nourish the idea that a boy or man is no more exempt from writing bread-and-butter notes than a girl or woman. We may not be able to collect a sixpence extra for manners, but possibly many hostesses all over the country will reap a welcome harvest from the seeds of good breeding that we sow.

Our letters written, we naturally turn our attention to filing. Probably the simplest method of teaching this is to make each individual responsible for the filing of the letters he writes throughout the course. It makes no difference what filing system is used, although a vertical-alphabetical-chronological combination is probably the most practical for this work. To teach a complicated system of cross-filing would be absurd. But let the laws of filing be as inexorable as those of the Medes and Persians—filing *must* be done according to given directions; filing *must* be done at a certain time; a paper taken from the files *must* be returned to its exact place within a certain definite time. Here again develop the attitude of mind that recognizes the advantages and necessity of unflinching, systematic accuracy rather than give instruction in technicalities. Of course, no secondary school expects to graduate a class of filing clerks. But if in the years to come there are a few more men who know exactly where to lay hands on important papers, and a few more women who know that they filed Johnnie's red mittens—with a moth ball in each—in the right-hand corner of the second drawer of the old bureau in the attic, the sum total of human happiness will be decidedly increased, particularly on the day of the first snowstorm.

No course in common-sense could be considered complete which does not equip the student with a better knowledge of our postal service than the majority possess. Uncle Sam will gladly furnish the textbooks for this part of the work. Write and ask him for the latest edition of the booklet called *Postal Information*. Any number of copies desired will be sent. These booklets give in compact form all the information that the average citizen ever needs. Not only does the student have one for his use in class work, but he also learns that he can get one at any time, free of cost, merely by applying for it; and this is a bit of useful information that many well-informed adults do not possess.

These books may at first sight seem decidedly dry, but unlimited zest may be given the work by making lesson assignments a series of practical, thought-provoking questions: What is the cheapest way of mailing out the school paper? Why is it foolish to put three cents instead of two on your letter if it seems extra heavy? What becomes of your letters if there isn't sufficient postage on them? Of your packages? Can you compel your postman to take your outgoing letters at your door? Your small parcel-post packages? Give complete directions for packing four dozen eggs to be sent by parcel post, insuring package, and sending it by special delivery to a brother living some distance away. A wide-awake class will bring in its own questions to add to the unlimited number that will occur to any instructor.

With reference to elementary banking knowledge, it should not take long to teach a few rudimentary facts. These should include a knowledge of kinds of accounts, drafts, travelers' checks, certified checks, and a few of the leading laws governing depositors in the banks of the state. Girls need such instructions as these more, if anything, than do boys. "There's no denyin' that women are foolish; the Lord Almighty made 'em that way to match men." And most bankers will affirm that when it comes to plain, common, banking sense He overdid it.

The use and abuse of the telephone—probably most of us have composed any number of mental monographs on this subject. Telephone common-sense is the crying need of the day. Can't we persuade the coming generation to remove their cigars before

using the telephone; that high C is a most unpleasant pitch for a telephone voice; that it is the business of the party calling to ask definitely for the person to whom he wishes to speak and not demand imperatively as soon as the connection is made, "Who is this?" (as a matter of fact it's none of his business who it is); that the use of "please" and "thank you" over the telephone is perfectly permissible? Can't we teach them to organize mentally the subject-matter of the business proposition they are going to take up over the telephone before they take down the receiver? Can't we teach them consideration in the length of time they hold the telephone? Can't we teach them to refrain from annoying busy people over the telephone with trifling matters? Well, no; probably not. The millennium is still in the dim distant future. But the attempt is worth while.

Install mock telephones in the classroom and assign telephone conversations under definite circumstances to given individuals for preparation; let transactions of importance be discussed over the telephone; let someone answer in the best way an angry complaint; someone else may get rid of a waster of the firm's time who, still, must not be offended; someone may order the groceries for the home that day. Let the class criticize results and then give the student a re-trial if necessary. If conditions existing in the school make it possible for a student to answer actual calls for a short time, with a critical committee of fellow-students listening to him, so much the better.

Class talks by instructor, students, and leading men and women of the town may be used to arouse students to the value of personality and to the possibility of the development of a pleasing personality by conscious effort. Manner, dress, physique, grooming, personal habits, mental attitude—all that goes to make up that intangible something called personality—can be discussed in these talks. Perhaps all that that gawky, pig-headed boy or that simpering, gum-chewing girl needs is a shove in the right direction. And who is there among the rest of us who would not profit by conscious effort along these lines?

Much of the work that has been suggested could and should be oral work. There should be a great deal of work in dictating

letters; better drill in composition could not be devised. The telephone work affords, of course, excellent drill in the practical handling of English. There is opportunity for many special oral reports before the class, reports of interviews of business men on topics of interest assigned by the instructor, reports of personal investigations of business conditions, reports on special articles in newspapers and magazines. Each member of the class in the Highland Park High School is required to appear in person before the superintendent of schools, the principal of the high school, or some business man and make application for a position. These students dread the ordeal, but gamely welcome the experience. This is one of the best features of the course.

Enlist the services of the prominent men and women of the town. They will be glad to help you give a course in common-sense, and there are innumerable ways in which they can be of service, some of which have been indicated in this article. The instructor cannot make a true success of the course unless he does secure the co-operation of these men and women, whose points of view and suggestions will have far greater weight with the students than mere pedagogical opinion.

One last word, a repetition: the course in common-sense can never be a cut-and-dried study of technicalities. It has but one object—to offset the curse the angry fairy has wished on many a modern prince and princess and to provide each of these with a mental equipment that shall insure success in the business world, in the social world, and, most important of all, in the home world.